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# VERSES

AND

## A Sketch

BY



JOHN ACTON

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COPYRIGHT,

1890,

BY THE AUTHOR.



TO HIS PRECEPTRESS,  
MARY E. HELMBOLD,

*of Philadelphia,*

WHO FIRST TAUGHT HIM TO VALUE THE BEAUTY  
OF THE IDEAL,

*This Book is Respectfully Dedicated*

BY  
THE AUTHOR.

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*ANENT APOLLO.*

---

**I**F Apollo ne'er gainsaid,  
My lapsed lute, instead of lead,  
Mayhap were singing fire ;  
For if the god were trier  
And tuner of the strings,  
One's song-set imaginings  
(Though light as zither-tinkling,  
Or dew that goes rose-sprinkling,  
Yet bearing oft warm weight of tears)  
Might seem worth while to one's own ears,  
At least. . . . What prayer, what cry,  
Will win the Song God in his sky ?

*A NORTHERN APRIL'S STRATAGEM.*

---

YOUNG April, slave to Winter-Naaman,  
Spoke to him low : "If healed by Earth's strong  
streams,  
Thy reign of life would last beyond thy dreams  
Of life." By faint hope spurred, the leper ran,  
With all his snows, from stream to stream. From van  
With gold-hued curve the sun shot withering beams  
Upon the seeking chief; and throbbing gleams  
Of wakened grass stole after him, to span  
And whip his heart to death. Keen April, slave,  
Laughing, sowed whitest seeds of bubbling rain,  
That June winds and June dews might roses own  
For loveliest toys and nests. And then she gave  
A wide search for her master. But in vain :  
The streams had drowned him, and Spring's sweet was  
known.

## TO CRESUS AT CHRISTMAS.

---

Mr. ———, the well-known patron of art, has a Raphael in his collection for which, it is said, he once refused three hundred thousand dollars.—*Exchange.*

YOUR Raphaels are very fair, I know ;  
But—painted figures need no bread. The snow,  
I say, can never harm their perfect feet  
(Your gallery being well roofed). . . . See ! up the street  
Comes that pale beggar again. A piteous sight  
His shoeless, bleeding feet this bitter night !

Your marble Venus would laugh at a shawl  
(If she could laugh) ; yet shivering, within call,  
A gray-haired widow goes, who would not smile  
(Except in thanks) at such good gift. And while  
Antinous' statue looks cold, chilled to death  
Is yonder young tramp, with his cough-crossed breath.

Your Fra Angelicos show Beauty's best  
By smiles of sweet child-angels. But the rest—  
The children not in pictures, and that die  
When fire and food are farther than their cry ;  
That go from some stark room to a tiny grave—  
Finding Death's hand, but never a man's to save !

*TO LAGGING FANCY.*

---

POETS call. . . . What charms your wings  
In the waste? Speed thence!  
Who may dream, or whose heart sings,  
If your providence  
Of pure spirit you withhold,  
The while you lie death-still and are death-cold?

Note Night's sky; were't not less fair  
If a light should fail?  
Poet-souls are stars; so, share  
Their swift shine; prevail,  
Lest death pierce to Poesy,  
And e'en one singing star fall from her sky.



*A CHILD AGAINST SHAKESPEARE.*

---

“THIS book says Shakespeare is dead.” . . . Oh, yes ;  
But that grieves the poets, my child, not me ;  
My grief were all in my loneliness  
If 'twere you in the grave, not he. You see,

He could not be eight years old, like you,  
And so his bayed brows would ne'er be to kiss,  
As yours are—sweeter uncrowned. “Is that true?”  
Yes, you more than Shakespeare, believe, I'd miss.

*A CHILD'S FLIGHT.*

---

“**N**OW I shall see the brothers of birds,”  
A pale child-dreamer said.  
Her breath for earth waned in her words  
And then she smiled and fled.

Is she death-dust? Never! I know  
She smiles again, and—this :  
Her “brothers of birds” now round her go—  
Winged angels, where Heav’n is.

*IN QUEST OF ROSELAND.*

---

“ I WISH I could find Roseland,”  
A little, wan child said,  
“ Where sweet, deep roses, thornless  
As Heav’n, grow white and red.”

If yon wide sky hide Roseland,  
And that to Heav’n be near,  
Soon was the child’s wish answered—  
Sweet flower upon her bier !

*A KING AND A CHILD.*

---

“ My dreams show  
That roses, thornless as a star,  
And white as Winter's thornless snow,  
Sweeten Thy sky-paths, O my King !—

“ How many hours to reach Thy sky ?”  
A child with wan and kissed face said ;  
By Death, Christ sent swift love-reply,  
And in that hour the child was dead.

Then, I know,  
In the fair land she deemed too far,  
This child found the fair King ; also,  
Thornless rose and swift welcoming.

## *SEEKING THE BEST KING'S SMILE*

---

AH ! when  
The king in his wooing did much prevail,  
O'er the princess' love that leapt  
Doubt like a swift dagger swept.

So, waiving the man and his lips a while,  
" Then thou art the fairest king of all ?"  
This princess asked whom Love had won.  
Death answered the asker. . . . 'Neath a pall  
They placed her. Then she passed the sun,  
And her best love woke at the best King's smile.

Ah ! then,  
'Neath the dusk-dimmed sweep of a willow's veil,  
How the princess' lover wept  
Where his dreamless idol slept !

*TO A PANSY.*

---

SWEET pansy,  
Is this what thy petals are—  
Twilights anchored round a star,  
Or a small sun faded into blue  
Up to a gold-corded space for dew?  
Thy beauty may be from either won,  
But I leave that to eve and the sun.

Sweet pansy,  
Rich, rounded amethyst from some young angel's brow,  
Or loosed from the velvet of his wings' looped snow—  
This thou art ;  
And garden-text of God,  
The text "Love," not "My rod"—  
This thou art,  
Sweet pansy.

*TO A MAPLE.*

---

SUCH exquisite proportion dost thou show—  
Trunk, bough and leaf as fine as orderly—  
That I have fancied thou didst, long ago,  
Turn from some perfect sonnet to a tree.

*JUNE.*

---

**M**ARGUERITE April and Ophelia May—  
April had jewels made of flawless rain,  
May laughed 'mid pansy-wreaths to hide death-  
pain—

Are dead, and Earth mourns not in black or gray.

June-Juliet watches her sun-knight all day

From her green-pillared arbor in the grass,

And birds and winds fly downward as they pass,

To teach sad hearts a song, strayed ships their way.

The corded dust of the sweet four-o'-clocks

In curdled leaves makes richest perfume-gifts

For dew and night, for which the gardens yearn ;

The satin-fingered grass winds round the phlox,

The jasmine sheaves thin honey in pale drifts,

And rosebuds all to loveliest love-gifts turn.



*AT THE GATE OF JUNE.*

---

THESE days a spotless Hand  
Turns garnered sky-gold to myriad drops  
Of honey, to sweeten the sweet rose-tops  
At the gate of June.

These nights, o'er all the land,  
Pulse dew and brooks, and fairy queens meet,  
Holding pink-clover wands, pansy-chains sweet,  
At the gate of June.

*IN THE GRASS.*

---

**I**N the green grasp of the grass  
How many fair things there are!—  
The valley-lily, dawn-dew,  
The daisy's summer-born star ;

Buttercups, mint, star of moss,  
Soft, swaying ferns, meek as slaves,  
And—bitter tears through a thousand years!—  
The countless sweet baby-graves !

*BABY'S FIRST PEARL.*

---

**A** SLEEP, each little tot is fain  
To find in Dreamland's gentle seas  
A pearl—white gem of useful gain,  
That babies seek, grown folk to please.

Wouldst see this pearl? Then wait, and hear,  
Some morn, a smiling mother say :  
“Why, Baby has a tooth—the dear !  
It must have come since yesterday !”

*BEAUTY'S BITTER CUP.*

---

“**W**OULD I were that sweet jacqueminot out there !” —  
Beauty glanced at her garden with a sigh—  
“ Since no maid’s cheeks can show a red as fair,  
And roses never dream that they must die.”

“ Would I were some scarred leper in a grave,  
Having a soul,” sighed the fair jacqueminot,  
“ Rather than my rose-self, that may not waive  
The doom of dust to which the soulless go !”

*GRIEF AS GUEST.*

---

BROOKWAYS were warm, the wildbird's note  
Pierced like swift pain the swaying rose,  
When to me, in a spirit boat,  
A pale child came. My house he chose

As dwelling-place, and then my heart.

I named him Love. I was not wise ;  
For, when he grew of me a part,  
It was as Grief, the Prince of Sighs.

*GRIEF'S EMPTY HANDS.*

---

GRIEF said to Hope : " I have a favor, friend,  
To ask. It is—that thou wilt seek, with me,  
Space for a garden which may equally  
Be ours to own, to beautify and tend.  
And let who will flow'rs for the garden send,  
In sign of friendliness ; so shall I see  
If it be true that mankind hath for me  
No gift of love, nor aught but tears to spend."  
When Grief and Hope had walled their garden-ground,  
They made it known to men, and soon there came  
Rich gifts of flow'rs unmarred by worm or thorn ;  
But 'mid the blooms not one for Grief was found :  
All were sweet Hope's. Then Grief, in very shame,  
Fled far from Hope, the world's dispraise to mourn.

*BEYOND MOTH AND RUST.*

---

**A** MOTH veered o'er a battlefield—  
'Twas hours ere dawn-light—  
Until it reached the rusting shield  
On a pearl-pale young knight.

The knight lay there, yet he, I know,  
Was in another land,  
Where moth and rust will never grow,  
And war and death are banned.

*THE IRISH SNAKE.*

---

**N**O vipers coil in Ireland's grass, you say.  
As true that is as if by Truth 'twere said.  
And yet, believe, on her sweet soil doth stay  
A deadlier snake than ever fanged and fled.

Its semblance man's ; its heart a bitter stone,  
Cold in the bitter, cold blood of its breast ;  
Traitor its name. . . . O Christ ! hear Ireland's moan,  
And crush this snake that breeds to crush her best !



*THE BLACK CASKET.*

---

“ONLY a negro.” . . . Friend, your thorns of words  
Come never from the sweet rose-tree  
Of Charity,  
Nor any black pierce to undo,  
But back to you.

“Only a negro.” . . . Was't your Maker's thought  
To have the black (whom He formed too)  
Wake hate in you,  
His brother? Never! . . . Ah, your sneers  
Were best shame's tears!

“Only a negro.” . . . Know, your “only” wounds  
The great, all-loving Christ, whose Tree  
Of Calvary  
He bore to bring His Father back  
Both white and black.

“Only a negro.” . . . Nay, not so, good friend,  
But the fit casket by God planned  
(Long ere you banned)  
To hold that pearl of pearls, a soul,  
With heav'n for goal.

*OUR RAIN AND OUR LADY.*

---

NONE but sweet raindrops e'er leave our King's sky,  
Though it lifts bitter waters from earth's serving seas ;  
And to earth's lightest thirsting our King's swift reply  
Is the deep dew of rain to His rivers and trees.

None but sweet answers e'er leave our King's sky,  
Though oft-times grief-bitter our words as we pray ;  
And, our Queen but once pleading, her Son's swift reply  
Is the deep dew of peace for our hearts and our way.

## *THE SACRED HEART.*

---

'TIS the Rose of North and South,  
Of West and East ;  
Rich with Love's drainless dew, no drouth  
Can waste it in the least—  
This greatest Flower of June's great Feast.

Its fair home is double-named—  
“ Heaven ” and “ the sky ; ”  
Its Lily-Mother God-acclaimed  
To plead for souls that cry  
For help to the great Rose on high.

*DIVES.*

---

(BEING A SLIGHT HINT TO HIS MODERN IMITATORS.)

---

THE pallid palms of Need  
Besought. He took no heed. . . .  
One day his robe of hyacinth-blue  
Grew heavy with Death's awful dew.

And now may Charity  
Offer no cup, ah me !  
Though 'neath the robe of hyacinth-blue  
Thirst's fiery sword doth pierce him through.

*COLD AS CHARITY.*

---

**A** H me! the bitter thing this beggar wails,  
With pallid, frozen palms beseeching me :  
“ Passer, in Christ's name, help ! My body fails  
For food and fire : *'tis cold as Charity !*”

O Sacred Heart ! 'tis such as I have made  
This beggar-byword of sweet Charity,  
By heart self-bound, by crust and coin delayed,  
E'en though Thy dear poor pleaded naming Thee.

*IN WHAT PART OF THE SKY?*

---

IN yon wide sky,  
Where is the loveliest place to rest—  
Its East, its zenith, or its West?

. . . . .

Where Christ, the King,  
Sits, Love beloved, on His fair throne,—  
'Tis there yon sky is Heaven's own.

*A TREE'S GOOD-FRIDAY WISH.*

---

MY heart craves more than branch and breeze,"  
A budless Tree did say ;  
"The meekest flower, if God should please,  
I'd gladly wear to-day."

'Twas Friday then. The meekest Flower  
(With Nails for pistil) came,  
The yearning Tree a while to dower :  
Christ is the Flower's name.

*TO A LILY OF THE VALLEY AT EASTER.*

---

THOU art the lamb of lilies  
    (The callas are the sheep),  
And thy fold is the fairy fastness  
Where golden grass gnats leap.

The sky, too, hath a Lamb, dear,  
    Amid its callas tall,  
Though His eyes ope this joyful morning  
    Where earthly spring-birds call.



*TO AN EMINENT BOTANIST.*

---

““FLOW’R o’ the May ’—some poet’s perfect name  
For the most perfect lily-bell.’”\*  
Your praise, I fear, o’erthrows your flow’r-made fame :  
You class not lilies well.

Know that in yonder sky there blooms to bless  
The only perfect Lily—she  
Whose Son the King hath passed the bitterness  
Of His Good-Friday Tree.

---

\* The lily of the valley.

*TO A STATUE OF JESUS.\**

---

O MY Beloved ! whoso looks on Thee,  
Feels the hot, hasting tears o'erflow his eyes,  
And in his breast heart-piercing stress of sighs,  
That Thy sad, beauteous Face so meek shouldst be ;—  
As if Thou saidst : “ My child, canst not love Me ?  
Lilies thou lovest well, and that is wise ;  
But am I not a Flower, too, to prize—  
Thy saving Rose from the Good-Friday Tree ?”  
O Jesu ! Jesu ! do not break my heart  
With Thy mild pleading—Thou who hast the right  
To strike me dead before Thee ! Rather cry :  
“ Worm, worship Me, lest, after the deep dart  
Driven by Death hath reached thee, thy soul's flight  
Be unto anguish, not to My fair sky.”

---

\* At the Church of the Gesù, Philadelphia.

## MUSICAL SUBJECTS.



*THE PERFECT QUATRAIN.*

---

THE perfect quatrain—no book yet  
Hath that been entered in :  
'Tis the rhymed strings of Music, set  
Upon the violin.

*THE PIANISTE.*

(TO O. H.)

---

SHE seeks the laugh of the keys,  
Till Joy, with his heart's ease,  
Comes swiftly unto her,  
'Neath her hands to sing, to stir,  
To voice the heart-deep smiles that run  
With Mozart through his music's sun.

She seeks the cry of the keys,  
Till Grief (as winged Joy flees)  
Comes swiftly unto her,  
'Neath her hands to sob, to stir,  
To voice the soul-deep tears that crowd  
With Chopin through his music's cloud.

## CHOPIN'S MUSIC.

---

THE doves wake with their moaning, and  
We see but thorns and bitter sand  
In place of bloom and brook ; and Love lies dead,  
We dream—all tears in these tones o'er him shed.

Then, light as lilies lengthened 'mid light grass  
By touch of June, a sudden laugh will pass  
From out the chords,—as if a child should come  
On a closed coffin, hiding lips too numb  
To kiss their own (oh ! mother-lips, death-cold !),  
And, fancying it a doll-house brought to hold  
Her toys, haste from the death-drear room to seek  
Her little friends and smile and name her prize,  
Grief never once anear her fond surmise :  
“ 'Tis from manma ; and she'll come, too, next week.”

Like this poor babe's, my master, the rare mirth  
That suns thy music is : round it grave-earth,  
World-sorrows and thine own press piteously,  
And yet it sings and sings as if death could not be.

## *WHEN ZITHERS SOUND.*

---

WHEN zithers sound,  
I dream of **m**aples in the spring ;  
Of pearls ; of the blue blossoming  
Of violets ; of creaming beads of corn  
In husks of moss-green silk ; of a gold horn,  
Thin as a lilac-leaf, by fairies blown  
At duskfall ; of white lilies grown  
Where nuns and doves are ; of night-dews  
(Like small gray grapes by starlight) ; of clear clews  
In answering eyes for those who seek love's sign  
In their hearts' idols—all these dreams are mine,  
And more as moth-light : Fancy is unbound  
When zithers sound.



## THE ANGELS.

---

PARAPHRASED FROM THE GERMAN OF LOEWENSTEIN.

---

NOW let me tell thee, my little one,  
How fair, in fair paths above the sun,  
Are the kind angels, with faces bright  
As earth and heaven in the spring light,  
When gentle pulsing of brook and grass  
Marks the mild May-hours as they pass :  
Their reverent eyes are clear as the air  
And blue as the sky ; in their gold hair  
Dewed, deathless flowers are twined ; and their wings  
Are moonlight dotted with shining rings  
From the stars' edges. . . . Such, little one,  
Are the angels by whom God's work is done.

Now let me tell thee, my little one,  
How the angels fly, that good be done :  
Softly as snow wavers from cloud-height,  
Or the moon trails her heaven-pure light ;  
Softly as mignonette from Earth grows,  
Or scent of rose-hearts through June air flows :  
Softly as parting of leaf from tree,  
Or the opening of doors for memory,—  
So softly, lightly, my little one,  
Fly the angels by whom God's work is done.



# A SKETCH.

## *BERGHEIM'S BIRD.*

(A SKETCH.)

There is a certain mazourka of Chopin's, half laughter, half grief, that makes one think of a just-drawn cup of champagne across the bubbling brightness of which white funeral-flowers have fallen.

Judith Bergheim always distinguished herself in playing it. She possessed that subtly sympathetic musical apprehension without which Chopin is a sealed book to the pianist. Nevertheless, she has shelved the mazourka permanently, and were she ever forced to listen to it again, the bitterness of death would, I think, be hers.

Bergheim never tired of hearing it dance beneath his wife's exquisite hands. It was not the best thing for nerves like his—sensitive as the E-string of a violin, his friends declared—but Bergheim did not think of that. Enough that it brought him visions. (For, you know, even an ornithologist, practical with nightingale as with parrot, may have visions.)

Bergheim's book, "Birds of All Lands," promised to bring him fame. It had been a labor of love, and would be a pecuniary success. That were offset, at least, to the daily, distressing headaches from which he now suffered as the result of mental overwork. It had been pain for a purpose—a worthy one, if he did say so himself. But the strain was over at last, and he could take a much-needed rest. No more midnight oil

to burn above ghost-white foolscap, the lamp's friendly flame holding the dark aloof, if not the moth.

Bergheim began to wonder whether he had seen the last of the wan-faced figure that visited him nightly in his study. She always came at an hour when he was too weak from weariness to stay her and force her to tell who she was. Was her shivering caused by the chill of the new-made grave from which she might have come? Perhaps she was not a dead woman: the hyacinth blue of her robe was scarcely the color for a shroud. He wished that he knew, and that her eyes were less mournfully accusing. There was no reproach in them for him, though, he said to himself: those whom he had wronged were neither in the grave nor out of it. He must tell Judith about this gliding woman: one's wife could help to clear up the mystery. He had been too much engrossed in the home-stretch upon his book to remember that Judith deserved his immediate confidence. Well, it was not too late yet.

Hark! There was that mazourka again! What a drawer to delicious languor it was!—potent beyond any opium—lightest-footed guide to the prismatic paths of Fancy. Dear Judith! She played Chopin well—if he *was* a partial critic.

He went over to the music-room, his eyes alight with an unwonted gleam. Judith, busy achieving full-voiced chords, did not hear him. He tiptoed up to her, drew her beautiful head to his breast and pressed his lips against the rose in the rich olive of her cheek.

Judith, smiling, shortened the piano's story to hear her husband's.

It was not the every-day, yet welcome, one she had expected. Bergheim caressed her hair with unsteady hands while telling it. Perhaps, he suggested, in conclusion, she could say who the figure in hyacinth-blue was.

Judith listened like one in a dream. For what seemed an age—it was in reality but a few moments—she could neither speak nor move. Then the reaction came. What horrible calamity was this that had overtaken her heart's beloved, her king of men? What had he done, that this unspeakable thing should be visited upon him? Her heart fluttered like a wounded bird, the room swam, grew black, suffocated her. She clenched her hands in her anguish. Then, like a flower stabbed by a thousand-bladed wind, she bent low over the keys, and the tiny altars of song, still warm with the fire of Chopin, bore the added heat of sudden tears. Was this to be his fate, now that fame waited upon his years of noble effort? That strange look in his eyes! His burning hands! "Oh my God!" she sobbed, "have mercy! Spare him! Kill me rather! Listen! I am nothing—nothing! A grain of sand, a ribbon of weed, is more! Smite me instead! God—God! Hear me! Just once—once, I say! Oh, help! mercy! mercy! King! King! He is too young—too young to go mad!"

Bergheim caught her in his arms as she fell heavily from the stool. Mechanically he carried her to her chamber. Here was another mystery, like that of that midnight woman. Why did Judith lie so white, so still? She looked like marble. Had she turned to a statue? Why did everything puzzle him so? And his head—that pain throbbing like a pulse—if it would cease for just a little while!

He went back to his study. Picking up a book, he turned the leaves to find something of interest. But he could not read: the letters had become black gnats and danced up and down the page. It seemed so strange. Then a confused recollection of his wife's last words came back to him. "Mad!" he murmured. "Oh, no!" with a quavering laugh, "Chopin was not mad, Judith. You must know that. He is the Sorrow

of music, but he was never mad. No ! no ! never mad ! That mazourka of his—you must play it for me to-morrow, sweetheart—to-morrow and every day. It has a message especially for me. It sings : ‘ There is a bird that has, as yet, gone un-noted by any ornithologist. It will seek you out before your book is printed. If you succeed in describing it accurately, your fame will be above Audubon’s. But have a care that it smite you not to silence ; for it is a bird of prey, with wintry wings keen as a two-edged sword, and man is its spoil to eternity.’ I want Judith to know that. I may be asleep when she comes down. Better put it on paper for her.” And with failing hands he did so. Then, his poor, spent brain hopelessly entangled in a network of pain and vagary, he sank back exhausted in his chair.

Upon regaining consciousness, Judith hastened in search of her husband. She found only what had been he, the scarcely dry little manuscript held tightly in his helpless hand.



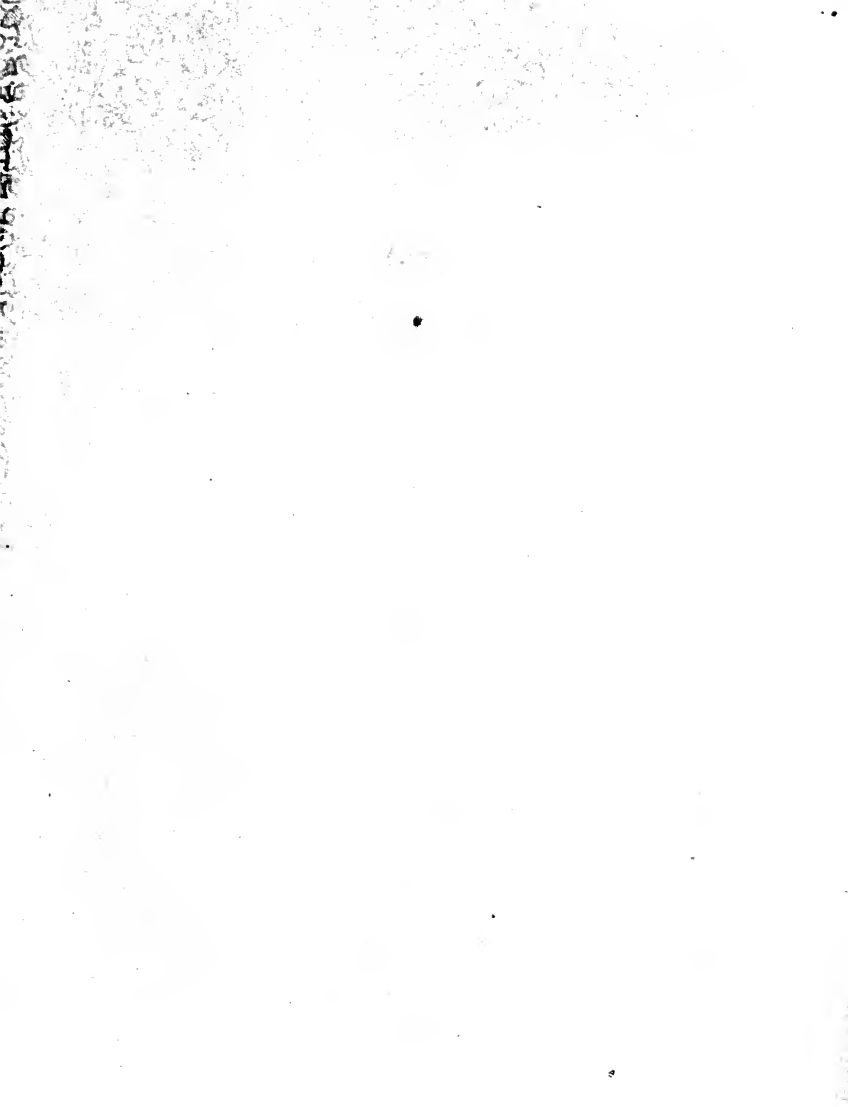












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